DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 856 CS 204 054

AUTHOR Schwarzlose, Richard A.
TITLE Socratic Method in Journalism.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (60th, Madison, Wisconsin, August 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ethical Instruction; Ethical Values; Government (Administrative Body); Higher Education; *Journalism Education; Laws; *News Media; News Reporting; *News Writing; *Questioning Techniques; *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS *Socratic Method

ABSTRACT

The Socratic method uses skillfully arranged and worded questions that, in sequence, lead the answerer toward some revelation. So that students may be exposed to their own and each other's views on legally and ethically acceptable journalistic responses to complex coverage situations, this document describes how the Socratic method may be used in courses on the press and society, communications law, government and the press, and media ethics. First, the background reading and writing that students need to complete prior to each Socratic session is described, and four essential ground rules for the instructor are given. Detailed examples of case studies are then given--one of a relatively realistic news situation, the other an insoluble ethical problem. The kind of questions the instructor should pose, as well as further suggestions for suitable topics, are presented. When the Socratic method is used effectively, students will gain insight into their own biases and thresholds for handling news and information, will hear other students' responses and realize the diversity of professional standards journalists bring to their craft, and will be exposed to a method of questioning that they can employ professionally later on. (CC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED151856

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Socratic Method in Journalism

Richard A. Schwarzlose

Northwestern University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Richard A. Schwarzlose

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

This paper has been prepared to supplement the plenary session featuring Harvard Law Professor Arthur Miller in a demonstration of the Socratic method. The plenary session, "The Teaching of Ethics: A Drama in 27 Acts," is sponsored by the Teaching Standards Committee and will be at 8:30 a.m., Tuesday, Aug. 23.

CS 204 054

Socratic Method in Journalism

Richard A. Schwarzlose

Babette Banal, John Marshall Pettyfogger, Heinrich Schweinhund and a host of other notorious characters are currently making the rounds of the professional meetings, and wherever they go, the reporters, editors and a sprinkling of lawyers and judges who meet them do not easily forget them.

Banal, a leading Right-to-Lifer with an abortion to hide, and her only slightly fictitious colleagues are leading personalities in case studies on journalism law and ethics confronting journalists at a spate of recent regional and state professional gatherings.[1]

Handled in Socratic format, the case studies challenge reporters and editors to examine the legal and ethical implications of their professional responses to these complex coverage situations.

A frequent conductor of these sessions has been Arthur R. Miller who is scheduled to demonstrate the method in a plenary session of the 1977 Association for Education in Journalism Convention, sponsored by the Teaching Standards Committee.

This paper is intended to supplement that demonstration with a description of how the Socratic method may be used in such courses as press and society, communications law, government and the press, and media ethics.[2]

The purpose of these sessions in the classroom is to expose students to their own and each other's views on legally and ethically "acceptable" journalistic responses to the cases.

This teaching method is, of course, named after the Greek philosopher Socrates who is supposed to have employed a gadfly,

questioning style to get pupils to examine their assumptions and values. Socrates left no written record of his methods and philosophy. What we know of both comes to us through the writings of his principal students — Aristophanes, Xenophon and Plato, especially Plato's use of Socratic method (including Socrates' name) to arrive at philosophical principles.[3]

The method teaches by use of skillfully arranged and worded questions which in sequence lead the answerer toward some revelation. Socrates used the method in three ways: (1) to cause the respondent to become aware of his own ignorance on a topic; (2) to teach virtue (Socrates believed that virtue was knowledge and thus could be learned by examination of alternatives.); and (3) to seek precise definitions for concepts and principles.

At the heart of this approach is an agnostic's love of doubt and uncertainty. "One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing," said Socrates, who made a special point of doubting all those cherished beliefs and dogmas which men cling to. But while he doubted those beliefs, Socrates' mission was to get others to doubt their own assumptions and certainties, and to do this he would challenge their every word, definition and assertion.[4]

The strength of the method in Socrates' hands is evident in the fact that his pupils, all subjected to the same questioning process, came away formulating their own unique and quite different philosophies of man and society.[5]

Instructors may be uneasy about the prospect of students exploring and developing individual views about journalistic ethics (A thorough discussion of that knotty pedagogic problem is beyond the scope of

this paper.), but until journalism has a definable and enforceable set of professional standards, an instructor has little else to teach in this area except his own code. The instructor handing down a code is more dangerous intellectually, it seems to me, than allowing students in the safety of the classroom to grapple with their own tentative first thoughts on ethics.

On the other hand, the Socratic method is useful in breaking down the all-too-frequent and overly simplistic student responses to ethical problems -- ranging from "I don't know what to do, so I'll ask my editor" to "I'll print it and be damned because the press can do no wrong" or ". . . because the public has a right to know."

Assuming that the law provides a sketchy, uneven foundation of limits on journalists' actions, I focus my case studies primarily on that churning, shifting sea of ethical options above the legal bed rock.

As preparation for each Socratic session, students must get through specific readings which are, in turn, discussed for clarification and elaboration in class prior to the session,[6] and they must write a 500- to 750-word position paper on the area the upcoming session will deal with.[7] These preliminaries clear the air on legal matters and get the juices flowing in the direction of the case study awaiting the students.

Working with class enrollments ranging from 15 to 26 students, I will devote between 45 and 90 minutes to a Socratic session, depending on the case's complexity and the time allowed by the course schedule. In most cases I present the facts to be considered orally and begin soliciting students' responses immediately thereafter. There are four groundrules that one must observe:

* Only the instructor can ask questions. As long as case facts are clearly and completely presented, the student should be discouraged from attempting to gain additional information.

* Only the instructor can change the facts along the way as he escalates the newsworthiness or the ethical conflict in a case.

* Students are required to answer as journalists, but without reference to the practices of specific newspapers, stations, magazines or professionals. "Devil's advocate" answers are forbidden; this is the instructor's exclusive domain.

* Only one student should be answering or responding at a time; dialogue among students (encouraged at other times in these classes) is prohibited during these sessions.

These rules are hard to keep in a heated confrontation, but the questions and answers must be as narrowly focused as possible. Too broad a set of circumstances or options will give students room to slip away from confronting the real problem at hand.

In my journalism courses the Socratic method is used for two purposes: (1) to force students to grapple with relatively realistic news situations and thus to become aware of their own, and fellow students', reactions to these situations and (2) to confront students with ethically insoluble news problems and thus to reveal students' non-journalistic bases for resolving the problem.

Below is an example of a realistic news situation which becomes progressively more public and newsworthy. The session, following an extended in-class discussion of the free press-fair trial issue, calls upon students to describe how they would handle the event and why.

Students are to assume that they are reporting for a non-competitive[8] metropolitan daily newspaper in a city of

one million people. At each step below the student is writing a first-day cover story based only on the facts presented.[9] This case is presented orally with discussion following each step.

STEP 1. This is an apparent suicide by a girl whose love affair is on the rocks. She is found on the ground outside her open seventh-floor apartment window. All information is from the police who surmise that it was a suicide from the evidence they have (e.g., apartment locked from the inside, no signs of a struggle, no valuables missing, her fingerprints on the window, but no suicide note.)

STEP 2. The first-day coverage can say it is a suicide. A suicide note was found and a coroner's jury holds that it was suicide.

STEP 3. The girl and her boyfriend quarrel quietly in the apartment they share, and he kills her with a pistol. Except for the single pistol shot, the neighbors are unaware of any violence or argument. The boyfriend reports the shooting to police and turns himself in to police when they arrive.

STEP 4. The girl and her boyfriend quarrel loudly and he chases her to a back stairway of the apartment building where he shoots her. Many neighbors are now aware of the quarrel and shooting.

STEP 5. At this point the case study begins to focus on the prejudicial pretrial news possibilities by playing out two scenarios based on Step 4.

SCENARIO A. The boyfriend, identified by neighbors, is still at large and the reporter receives information of a long

criminal record for the boyfriend (some convictions, including a few armed robberies, and many arrests) from the police along with police characterization of the boyfriend as a "mean man," uncontrollable and incorrigible. From the neighbors and the victim's family the reporter learns the boyfriend is a "good-for-nothing drifter, a drug user, the father of the victim's illegitimate son," and a host of other juicy tidbits.

SCENARIO B. The boyfriend returns to the scene of the shooting several minutes after police arrive and turn himself in to police without a struggle. At the station he dictates and signs a confession, which police read to the reporter and which the accused tells the reporter he has voluntarily given. Later, but in time for first-day coverage, the accused is arraigned and pleads guilty to a first-degree murder charge. The judge rejects the plea, order the accused held for trial and sets bail at $100,000. The reporter also has all the "juicy tidbits" from the police, neighbors and victim's family described in Scenario A. (As an added point here I will make the confession and the accused's voluntary act of confessing available only through a police press conference attended by competing local news media.)

STEP 6. The couple quarrel on a Saturday night and she throws him out. After spending Sunday working himself into a rage, the boyfriend follows her to a subway station Monday morning (She is on her way to work.) and missing a chance to shoot her at the station, he boards the train, walks up to her as she is seated in the crowded, moving train, and kills her with one shot. He leaves the train at the next stop and an

hour later turns himself in to police. All information in Scenario B is applicable here. (A similar incident occurred in Chicago about a year ago, and at this point I produce copies of the Chicago dailies' coverage of the event for a brief discussion.)

STEP 7a. All of Step 6 and Scenario A (boyfriend identified but still at large) will the added information that he's a lousy shot, and in his attempt to shoot the girl, he also kills a few innocent subway riders.

Throughout the session the first questions asked at each step are: How long a story do you write? Why? How much of this material available to you do you include in the story? Why? Where do you play the story in your paper on an average news day? Why?

By use of the progression, students are able to identify various personal news judgment thresholds: when a story becomes first-section news, top-of-the-page news, front-page news, lead copy, etc. In another dimension, several information thresholds are encountered: when hearsay, gossip, confession, prior record, etc. are usable; when further investigation seems necessary, etc.

The newsplay thresholds act primarily to sharpen students' awareness of their news judgment processes, but the growing propensity of students to use prejudicial information as the story grows in magnitude is predictable and most revealing to the students about themselves.

Other realistic news situations I've employed involve investigative reporting, confidential news sources, permitting access by private citizens to a newspaper's news columns, and producing a segment on abortion for CBS's "60 Minutes."

The second type of session -- an insoluble ethical problem --

begins with laying out all the facts available, no stepped or progressive structure as described above. Here the cases may be presented orally or in printed form prior to the session.

Professor Miller's demonstration during AEJ's 1977 convention is an example of this type, and his Heinrich Schweinhund case, used in various forms in several professional meetings recently, also illustrates this technique. Below is the version I use in class.

> Finneas Ferret is the chief investigative reporter for the Chronicle, the only daily in the ethnically mixed, populous Midwestern city of Idyllia.
>
> Simon Wiesenthal, famed Nazi hunter, is in town for a speech and grants Ferret an interview. During the interview Wiesenthal reveals that he believes one of the targets of his investigation lives in Idyllia under an assumed name. After intensive pressure from Ferret, Wiesenthal reveals that the ex-Nazi is Heinrich Schweinhund who is the leading stockholder and chief executive officer of a large corporation which is primarily engaged in the manufacture and sale of aluminum windows and siding and building supplies. The company run by Schweinhund is one of the largest in the nation and is the largest employer in Idyllia. Wiesenthal asserts that Schweinhund, who emigrated to the United States in 1947 from Europe, is a former Nazi who served at several concentration camps in Eastern Europe. Ferret asks when or whether Wiesenthal will approach authorities with this information and he answers that he does not know whether Schweinhund's true identity will become known. As a foreign national, Weisenthal is ordinarily at pains to get local authorities to listen to him. Ferret demands proof, and Wiesenthal, after

a quick trip to his hotel room, produces documents and photos which seem to link Schweinhund to Nazi concentration camps, serving as commendant of one for nine months. Ferret investigates further and finds that since his emigration to the United States, Schweinhund has apparently lived a wholly non-political life. He is extremely active in numerous civic organizations, including the Rotary Club, and is in line for election as vice-president of that organization this year and will, if tradition holds, be Rotary's president in two years. In addition, Schweinhund has been extremely helpful to a number of charities, including Jewish ones. He's on a round-the-world tour and cannot be contacted.

The complexity of these circumstances makes it impossible for a student to rely solely on existing journalistic practice and policy in deciding whether to break the story and how much of this material to use. I reject as simplistic the occasional responses to such cases that "the public has a right to know" or "I'm free to publish anything I can get my hands on" (even though some professional will rely on such justifications).

The case raises several focal points for discussion, including: Wiesenthal's attempt to manipulate the reporter; the credibility of Wiesenthal's evidence; is further investigation called for, and if so, what type and where; weighing Schweinhund's possible guilt against the economic impact on Idyllia if the story breaks; exploring courses of action for the reporter other than publishing the story; deciding whether other past affiliations (ex-Communist, ex-Klansman, ex-Democrat)

wouldjustify exposure; and deciding whether other present affiliations (various political affiliations, Gay Liberation, American Sunbathers Association, or various religious affiliations) would alter the status of the story.

Such cases are free-for-alls, especially if students can study the facts overnight and develop firm opinions on handling the case. Ordinarily these opinions begin to be tinged with anti-Nazism, anti-Semitism, do-goodism, and the like. Identifying these non-journalistic motives can be uncomfortable, but -- and students agree -- the net effect of these encounters is revealing and constructive.

Other unsoluble cases I've used are: a candidate for public office with a shady (but not wicked) background; a prominent Right-to-Lifer who is concealing an abortion; acquisition of transcripts of wire taps on State Department phones which reveal greater U.S. involvement in the Middle East than is publicly acknowledged and give contingency plans for direct U.S. military involvement if another Middle East war breaks out; discovery of the plans and preparations for the Bay of Pigs invasion; discovery of sexual and drinking habits, themselves well concealed, that have led to the total inability of the speaker of the house of the state general assembly to perform even basic duties.

Both types of sessions, if conducted aggressively and with a theatrical flair (feigning ignorance, surprise, hostility, agreement, etc., as responses dictate), can elevate students to levels of personal involvement and responsiveness commonly lacking in the classroom. And since the cases set up personal and professional problems of the most profound type, much about journalism can be learned from this involvement.

The process, however, is like a time bomb. Any session can break down immediately and irreparably either if students begin playing devil's advocates or respond irresponsibly or if students are allowed to argue among themselves. There is also the slow fuse effect of attempting too many sessions with one class. Students may begin focusing on the instructor's game plan, rather than on the substance of the cases, and eventually they may try to short-circuit the sessions when they realize this deck is always stacked against them.

But when that magic frequency of sessions is identifed and the instructor (literally) has his act together, students will look forward to the sessions. If all systems are functioning, students will gain insight into their own biases and thresholds for handling news and information, they will hear other students' responses and realize the diversity of professional standards journalists bring to their craft, and they will be exposed to a method of questioning which they can employ professionally later on.

Ethical codes abound in journalism and generally are no more effective than trying to keep students off the grass. How can instructors teach journalism's ethical principles when we have no binding set of canons such as the American Bar Association's and when what we do have is putty in the hands of practitioners?

Perhaps the realization that this is the status of journalism's ethics is the place to begin. Each journalism class is a cross-section of pre-professionals, a goldmine of uncertain and vacillating responses to journalistic problems. Socratic method mines and hauls to the surface this rich vein for all to see and think about.

---

[1] Several such conferences have been reported in the trade press. See, for example, Lewis C. Cuyler, "Ethics of investigative reporting questioned," Editor & Publisher, Sept. 13, 1975, pp. 10, 43; William H. Hornby, "ASNE workshop reaches out with Socrates," ASNE Bulletin, No. 599, October 1976, pp. 10-12; Alvin P. Sanoff, "Heinrich Schweinhund is an ex-Nazi!" The Quill, October 1976, p. 10; "Seminar delves into legal and ethical problems," Editor & Publisher, Jan. 15, 1977, p. 27; "When ethical blacks and whites turn cloudy gray," ASNE Bulletin, No. 605, May/June 1977, pp. 16-17; and I. William Hill, "More editor-lawyer talks planned by ASNE this year," Editor & Publisher, May 14, 1977, p. 12.

[2] The author has employed this technique over the past two years in a graduate "Government and the Press" seminar and an undergraduate "News Media and Society" course.

[3] See Plato's Laches, Charmides, Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, collectively called the "Socratic Dialogues," for reproductions of Socrates' dialectical teaching methods. Perhaps the best example is found in Plato's Meno where Socrates' questions lead an uneducated slave boy to demonstrate a special case of the Pythagorean theorem.

[4] Will Durant's The Story of Philosophy (New York: The Pocket Library, 1954), pp. 4-7, is an easily accessible overview of Socrates' approach. For a respected extended treatment, see A. E. Taylor's Socrates (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1933).

[5] George H. Sabine, A History of Political Theory (Rev. ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1950), pp. 32-33.

[6] I use a collection of readings intended to introduce and represent the topic and to stimulate individual thought on the topic. Other sources are legal texts and discussions and supreme court decisions.

[7] In about three-fourths of the sessions the students do not know the facts of the case before the session begins, and their position papers address the topic in general terms. For sessions where students study the case beforehand, I do not assign position papers.

[8] Introduction of either intra- or inter-media competition materially affects students' responses, making them much more willing to report everything. If I inject the competitive factor, it is only for the moment.

[9] At specific points in each case study I will ask for students' willingness to pursue investigation to augment the facts presented, including the nature and sources of investigation and the students' reasons for this followup.